Christopher Hutton

Language as Identity in Language Policy Discourse: Reflections on a Political Ideology

1. Introduction

This paper examines the intellectual and ideological basis of the notion that the vernacular, spoken language is (or should be) the basis of individual and collective identity in the public sphere. This model of identity privileges "orality" and is grounded in demands for linguistic transparency between the governed and the governing, and for the language of formative childhood experience to be also the medium of education, law, government, etc. Orality is understood here as an ideology that gives priority to speech and the properties attributed to speech, including its rootedness in the private and family spheres and in face to face interaction, its metonymic relationship to the primary networks of socialization, its perceived semiotic properties of naturalness, direct expressivity and embeddedness in landscape, in fundamental social rhythms, folk culture and traditions. These qualities, while they are associated in the first instance with speech, can be ascribed secondarily to written language, i.e. to a written idiom understood as a vernacular.

The arguments for models of group identity grounded in orality are familiar; they served to undermine feudal and colonial models of governance now generally accepted to have been oppressive, and involve recognition of the fundamental role that language plays in human identity construction. However this paper argues that the principle of identity as orality is potentially no less oppressive as a political ideology and that we need to look again at our political understanding of the relationship between native speech form, orality, and literacy. This model is not merely a political theory of human identity but has entered the science of linguistics as a barely unexamined postulate about the *true* nature of language and languages.

Underlying the ideological priority given to orality is a set of assumptions about what constitutes a natural linguistic order or an ideal

ethnolinguistic ecology. This natural order is contrasted with regimes of authority built on "artificial" languages of power, in a set of dichotomies that can be expressed as Protestant versus Catholic, authentic versus inauthentic, egalitarian versus hierarchical, etc. A progressive politics of language implies the citizen's access to power, his or her access to the texts of power (sacred texts, the language of laws and political life) and the open texture of a society in which there is no dramatic breach between the language of the private and public spheres.

This model implies a rejection of both imperial-dynastic and colonial models in which there is frequently a vast linguistic gulf between the governing and the governed. Dynastic and colonial systems are now understood as having been built on the inscrutability of alien power, and the coercive manipulation of ritual and symbols, including language. Modern anti-feudal and anti-colonial nationalism were grounded in a politics of language where the vernacular language or languages were projected as the basis for future language(s) of power. Artificial languages of the court or of the colonial elite were rejected, and linguistic transparency and orality promoted as a quality of national languages in waiting. Resistance to dynastic and colonial empires was frequently focussed on the question of naturalness in the relationship between writing and speech: court languages and languages of colonial administration were artificial, either intrinsically in that they were highly formal or ritualized varieties, or because they were alien imports into a pre-existing language ecology.

Modern progressive notions of language politics are thus based on two closely related ideas. Firstly, the language of primary socialization should be the language of public life; secondly, writing should be subordinate to speech. These two ideas come together in the idea of standardized written vernaculars. Emergent national languages were grounded in national speech. While there was inevitably a divorce or semiotic gap between writing and speech, the written language was subject to sovereignty of speech. Speech was "natural"; writing was "artificial" but could be made more natural by its relationship to the everyday speech of ordinary people, that of the *Volk*.

This paper will argue that there is nothing intrinsically progressive about this model of language politics. This position does not imply a defence of feudal or colonial language politics, but rather a question-

ing of the universal applicability of Romantic or ecological conceptions of linguistic identity.

2. The ecology of language

The ideology of orality is inseparable from an ecological understanding of linguistic naturalness. The ecological model has been given new impetus by concern for "endangered languages" and the perceived massive reduction in the world's linguistic diversity brought on by urbanization, migration, political, social and educational centralization, political repression, assimilation, marketization, and other processes loosely grouped under globalization. Linguistic diversity is understood as pairings of language systems and (ethnic) cultures. The need to save endangered languages is frequently based on the assumption that a lost language represents a lost world view:

> And there is another kind of loss, of a different type of knowledge. As each language dies, science, in linguistics, anthropology, prehistory and psychology, loses one more precious source of data, one more of the diverse and unique ways that the human mind can express itself through a language's structure and vocabulary (Ostler 2005: 2).

Mühlhäusler argues that language death will lead to lead to a situation where speakers "will employ the grammatical and semantic categories of Standard Average European (SAE) and deeper-level differences between human languages will have been replaced by superficial variation" (Mühlhäusler 1996: 283).

However, the rise of ecological metaphors for the socio-politics of language has had the ironic effect of shifting interest away from the agency and situated politics of ordinary speakers (the 'language makers', Harris 1980) and towards the implied malign agency of hegemonic national governments, global corporations, and Western cultural imperialism. It is not the purpose of this paper to defend these phenomena, but rather to point to the political dangers of the array of natural and naturalizing metaphors used in talking about language: "native speaker", "natural language", "mother tongue", and "language ecology".

A pioneer in the promotion of language ecology, Einar Haugen, recognized that the idea of a language as a living organism was "a metaphor only" (Haugen 1972: 326). Nonetheless, for Haugen, lan-

guages did have "life, purpose, form". He proposed to treat the "life" of language "in the spirit which I take to be that of the science of ecology" (Haugen 1972: 327). Ecology was concerned with "the interrelationship of organisms and their environments": "Languages have in common with organisms their persistence through time and their more or less gradual change, but they are not inherited biologically" (Haugen 1987: 91). Interestingly, Haugen suggests that language ecology is a speaker or user-centered theory of language: "[t]he ecology of language is determined primarily by the people who learn it, use it, and transmit it to others" (Haugen 1972: 325).

Haugen was committed to the importance of the ecological metaphor in terms of a direct parallel between natural and linguistic ecology. Noting that "Americans are impatient with groups that claim rights for their own language", Haugen (1987: 96) concluded:

> But the steamroller approach to small languages has much in common with the superhighway that flattens and destroys our landscape. What is group cohesion and ethnic pride worth? How can one measure in money the values that are lost when a group gives up its language in favour of another?

There is a revealing slippage here, in that one cannot say that the landscape elects to submit to the advancing bulldozers, whereas Haugen presents the group as agents in giving up their language. Of course the argument would be that such decisions are constrained by powerful external forces which in many cases amount to coercion. But that is a political argument, and the ecological metaphor has no special insight to offer here.

Haugen's parallel between languages and organisms is less than convincing. As Mufwene points out, it has led to the domination within historical linguistics of an artificial distinction between internally and externally motivated causes of change (Mufwene 2001: 15). The key distinguishing feature of a biological organism, as Haugen himself recognizes, is that organisms transmit their identity across time through biological reproduction. This is precisely the feature absent from language and other social practices transmitted through socialization. The metaphor of languages as organisms draws attention away from institutional, cultural, ritual, political aspects of language, and from the understanding of language as involving situated, individual action. The kind of agency that Haugen himself appears to attrib-

ute to the users of a language is entirely absent in biological systems. The ecological metaphor works ideologically to discourage serious political reflection and socio-cultural analysis. A further important feature of the rhetoric of ecology is that the identities that are threatened in ecological disruptions are collective, and that, further, these identities are founded on group cohesion. This again prejudges a whole set of important questions about the relations of the individual to the group, and gives priority to an organicist model of community as total integration.

Mühlhäusler suggests that a linguistically globalized world would mean the domination of the European caste of mind. But – leaving aside the misleading proposition that it is only European languages that are encroaching on "endangered languages" – this model only makes sense if we consider that languages determine thought. Whorf's model, from which this is derived, is fundamentally flawed, since Whorf's understanding of the Hopi world view, for example, was contingent on a prior grammatical analysis that demonstrated the structural differences between Hopi and European languages (Whorf 1956). But it is a serious category error to conflate the grammatical analysis offered by an academic linguist with the world view of the speakers of the language. It is furthermore unclear what political role linguists have to play here: surely it is not being suggested that the reduction of endangered languages to writing can somehow preserve the speakers' world view for posterity?

As sociolinguists we need to attend to the texture of the everyday politics of language. An anecdote may help to illustrate this point. Recently in Hong Kong I got into the lift in my building with a Chinese family and as we progressed upwards I noticed an interesting feature of their conversation. The children were speaking English and the parents Chinese, Cantonese. The parents addressed their remarks to the children in Cantonese and my strong sense was that they wanted the children to reply in Chinese, perhaps because they were embarrassed by my presence and the fact that their children were unwilling to participate in a dialogue in Chinese. Evidently the children were being educated in an international English-medium school. Such parents are not Anglophiles, nor are they filled with self-hatred; they simply make the educational choice for their children which they believe will benefit the children in the longer run, and this overrides

their very powerful sense of loyalty to Chinese culture. The discomfort of that short journey in the lift symbolized the price they were willing to pay, which included a degree of linguistic distance between the generations in the family and the guilty sense that they have failed in a key cultural obligation, even while they have tried to fulfil another. This discomfort increases where the grandparents are monolingual Chinese speakers.

For some this would be a tale of the malign effects of linguistic imperialism (Philipson 1992) in which the natural bond between ethnicity or race and language is broken down; for me the irony was that at least in the micro context the children were in control, in effect using my presence to embarrass their parents. But whatever the moral of this story, there is nothing here that corresponds to a loss of linguistic diversity. To be consistent, an ecological approach of language would have to look at the spread of English as part of language ecology (Mufwene 2001: 118) rather than as a noxious force operating from "outside". The question this anecdote raises for me is very basic: who has the right and authority to pass judgment in cases such as these?

Haugen's understanding of identity reflects his intellectual roots in the national and ethnic politics of pre-WWII Europe, including fears about assimilation and the effects of migration to the United States: "It is by slow, incessant attrition that each foreigner has been turned into an American, idea by idea, and word by word. Every language spoken by the American immigrant bears the marks of this conflict" (Haugen 1972: 1). Migration however is a universal feature of human history. Even in its own terms, this ecological model is primarily reactionary. The ecological metaphor dictates that progressive language politics arise primarily from resistance to change. Change is understood as coming from an ill-defined "outside", now frequently identified with globalization. For all the superficial praise of polycentric language systems and linguistic diversity, this model is grounded firmly in the tradition of European Romantic monolingualism. Whatever one's view of globalization, it is not international capitalism that is disrupting the pure ethnolinguistic identities of peoples around the world. These never existed except in the minds of intellectuals and as sociopolitical ideology. Each ethnolinguistic community can be understood as having an unbounded degree of internal linguistic diversity, since

diversity can only be defined relative to specific criteria, and the choice and application of criteria are essentially a matter for the observer.

3. Historical background

The notion of vernacular or mother tongue identity is frequently compared favourably with the modern concept of race. Identities based on language are seen in general as politically softer, more progressive and less intolerant than those based on race. The concept of *Volk* as elaborated by German thinkers was a secularized version of the Biblical concept of people *(am)*. The Biblical model of human identity was founded on the notion of a patrilineal lineage traced forwards from an original ancestor. Lineages were distinguished by language, and became separate nations with their own territories. Human history was the story of unities that were divided, beginning with Adam and Eve, and later, with the sons of Noah. Within this discourse of nation as patrilineal lineage group, language and homeland, one key concept was that of original or primitive (or "prime") languages, i.e. languages not created by a mixing between languages.

In early modern Europe, proto-nationalist scholars began to use this Biblical framework to make the case for the antiquity and ancient purity of particular European peoples and languages. The sons of Noah, i.e. Shem, Ham, and Japhet as the progenitors of three branches of mankind, the Semites, the Africans and the Europeans: "every one after his tongue, after their families, in their nations" (Genesis 10). These models involved working backwards, i.e. starting with the observed language communities of contemporary Europe and attempting to construct a link back through history to the Biblical lineages. The metaphor of the family tree was applied to peoples, and the older the roots, the greater their legitimacy and authenticity.

The notion that an individual's identity is derived primarily from their spoken or "vernacular" language is one of the most radical in the history of identity theorizing. In the long term the Protestant position that demanded linguistic transparency and direct individual access to religious truth fused with a Romantic, affective understanding of identity. This stressed the incorporation of the individual into the collective through the affective or emotional bonds that are forged in early

childhood, in which the child absorbs and internalizes the culture or "world view" of a speech community. That community was seen as an organic and cohesive whole, transmitting its collective identity primarily through the institution of language. Linguistic transparency is absolute, in the sense that the natural and social worlds are realized perfectly through the language, but it is also discrete and autonomous, since other speech communities by definition do not share this world view. Processes of assimilation, interaction and convergence are thus seen as threatening to the integrity of the speech community and noxious to the transmission of its fundamental world view to the next generation. On this model, the authority and prestige of a standard written language is derived from its roots in the *affect* or emotional linguistic bonds of child and mother. A corollary of this model is a distrust of bilingualism and of social mobility through education.

As a political model elaborated by German theorists of *Volk*, language was not seen primarily as a mirror of reality. It was an authentic language of individual and collective self expression through which the self and world were fused. On the collective level, the theory suggested that different linguistic collectives (nations or *Völker*) lived in different realities, in incommensurable worlds. The philosophical problem of how self, language, and world are connected was solved by denying that they occupied discrete domains. As a political theory, this saw the new-born baby rapidly inducted through the surrounding language of family intimacy (the "mother tongue") into a set of associations, a sensibility, and an object world that was suffused with the affect of a language of intimacy and childhood idyll, and which emotionally bound the individual, the landscape and the community. Through this language the world was made knowable, but it was the world that a particular language had created, into which the individual was born and through which he or she achieved self-realization. These bonds were not merely profoundly formative, they came to be seen as sacred and inviolable. Writing was thus seen increasingly as dependent on speech, and ideally subservient to it. The dominance of speech over writing was seen as the natural order of things.

The rise of this theory coincided with the expansion and formalization of European empires in the nineteenth century. The logic of the Romantic theory of language was that the native language of the governed should be the same as that of the ruling class, a concept evi-

dently quite foreign to feudal, dynastic and colonial states. In the longer term, ideas of the desirability of a natural affinity between ruler and ruled would define these political models as inauthentic and oppressive.

4. Protestant missionaries and the linguistic order of China

One radical application of this Romantic theory was in missionary views of the sociopolitics of China. Premodern Western scholars had frequently found much to praise in Chinese culture and institutions. The Chinese writing system had been seen as a philosophically ideal system. It was free from the contingencies of sound and thus able to offer a pure and direct representation of things or ideas (Leung 2002). However nineteenth century Protestant missionaries found in this perceived alienation of writing from speech the key to the malaise of Chinese culture and society. The writing system and the *literati* style were increasingly viewed as artificial, obscurantist, "dead". The application of this essentially European model of liberation linguistics led to an aggressive assault on Chinese institutions and political culture. Protestant missionaries envisaged the transformation of China into a post-imperial, modern, Christian nation analogous to the European, post-Reformation states grounded in a national, vernacular language.

The ideal writing system was one held to establish a natural relationship between speech and writing. The Roman alphabet was seen as natural in its faithfulness to speech, and its orality was seen as endowing it with vitality, flexibility and dynamism. Orality was favoured in a Protestant theology that looked to the direct communication of the "living word" and rejected elaborate hierarchies of interpretation and authority. The Chinese character was anomalous in that it was divorced from speech and its perceived rigidity made it an inappropriate vehicle for modernity. For Samuel Dyer (Dyer 1835), the Chinese writing system symbolized Chinese resistance to reform; as an institution it created mental inactivity and diverted energies which were badly needed elsewhere. Replacing Chinese characters with the Roman alphabet would allow a purge of the extant Chinese literature – most of what was presently available could be dispensed with without serious loss. Radical language reform would effect an intellectual revolution, in which much of the textual past was to be suppressed.

From the Protestant point of view, the Chinese Mandarin officials were a priestly caste, holding power through an arcane and unnatural written language, with the court of the emperor, like the Vatican, a site of corrupt rituals and bureaucratic secrecy. The people, held in ignorance, could be liberated by direct access to the truth through their own language of everyday experience, a process that would bypass the perceived evasions, ambiguities, and false ornamentation of *literati* style. Linking the Chinese situation explicitly to the language politics of the Reformation, Protestant missionaries talked of a struggle against Latin, and Latin as a cause of ignorance among ordinary people. The same struggle needed to take place in China, where the classical literature and classical written language was seen as the semiotic equivalent of Latin. Like Latin "it is read with different pronunciations in all parts of the Empire, and may be regarded as not a spoken language, except the most Ancient referred to above" (Preston 1876: 154). The aesthetics of the Papal vision and the Chinese *literati* examination were directly parallel.

The following was written by a Protestant missionary in China but much the same rhetoric came from later Marxist nationalists (Brewster 1901: 295-296):

> Herein lies another serious indictment against the classical [Chinese] character, namely that it develops a *privileged class*. Where the ability to read and write in any nation is confined to a literary caste, it follows as the night the day, that the members of this caste obtain and permanently hold the reins of government. Such a class of men would be something more than human if they did not fashion the government, so that they would obtain all the political plums and enjoy every possible privilege at the expense of the ignorant and almost helpless masses. […] The all but universal corruption in the administration of public affairs is a legitimate fruit of this system of government by a privileged class. […] The illiterate classes have opinions. They know they are oppressed. They resent it. But they cannot be heard, because they cannot speak through the press. They cannot organize a reform without educated leaders. As long as the masses endure in sullen silence, or break out only in an occasional abortive uprising that is easily crushed, these privileged men will go on near as possible in the ways of their fathers, oppressing the people whom they despise because they can neither read nor write.

The logic of this Protestant position was accepted by radical Chinese intellectuals, and the promotion of language reform was a fundamental feature of Chinese intellectual and political discourse in the twentieth century (DeFrancis 1950).

The point of this discussion is not to mount a defence of the language politics of premodern China, but to show how an originally European model of language and identity was channeled into China via an aggressive, modernizing imperial discourse. Proponents of an ecologically informed politics of mother tongue language rights are in a similar position to these nineteenth century Protestant missionaries, in that they are advocating a single, originally European, model as a solution for the complex linguistic dilemmas facing societies across the globe. It is unclear why, if linguistic imperialism is understood as language ideologies emanating from the West, it is defined so as to exclude vernacular identity politics.

5. Conclusion

The ethno-political model discussed in the paper is an expression of one of the most fundamental transformative ideologies in modern European history, the notion of language as identity. The Protestant-Romantic model looks to the perfect, monolingual integration of the private and public spheres. Traditional cultural orders such as premodern China, pre-Reformation Christianity, traditional Judaism and Islam were based on a profound divorce between the private and the public linguistic spheres. These models have been rejected as foundations for the modern state; but the replacement by the concept of mother tongue has meant that language has become an index of descent, affinity and shared identity. The apparent collapse of racial notions of identity has obscured the extent to which these ideas have been preserved within linguistic theories of identity. Since intense anxiety is focussed on the transmission of linguistic identity from one generation to the next, there must be some underlying essence to which that linguistic identity is connected.

The promotion of orality, vernacular or mother tongue language politics is a socio-political ideology. It has different forms and different effects; it can be a progressive force for liberation, or subsumed within the stable everyday order of one particular society, or it can be part of a radical assault on the fabric of another; it can create a new state, or it can tear an existing state apart; it draws on a legitimate concerns for linguistic transparency and for respect for diversity but at its logical extreme has immensely destructive potential.

Intellectuals have a tendency to project their anxieties onto the social world and find that ordinary people are frequently a disappointment. This is the sub-text of linguistic imperialism, an example of how intellectuals often seek to lead and direct social change in the direction dictated by a particular ideology, in this case a blend of Marxism with ethnic nationalism. But the complex of forces operating in a globalizing world and the language choices and language dilemmas facing ordinary people cannot now be understood within the late nineteenth and early twentieth century model of linguistic identity: social change is running ahead of academic theory. The focus on the alleged loss of the world's linguistic diversity represents a profound political evasion. Paradoxically, it imposes from the outside a uniform pre-packaged ideology on a wide range of genuinely diverse sociopolitical contexts. It offers a "one size fits all" answer to the complex linguistic dilemmas that face many societies around the globe; it has nothing to say about the views and thinking of the speakers themselves who are caught up in these complex processes, beyond projecting onto them a "world view" which is no more than a linguist's construct. Driven by its ecological metaphor, it has nothing to say about social change, compromise and democracy.

While the force of arguments for linguistic transparency is evident, the unbounded application of the theory as ideology is permanently destabilizing, implying that a yet to be achieved perfect realization of linguistic authenticity is the only natural state of affairs. The Romantic model looks to the perfect, monolingual integration of the private and public spheres. But this integration can be understood not only as increasing transparency for the governed in relation to the language of power, but as increasing possibilities for integrating diversity coercively and for the exercising of social control from the top down. In its politically most extreme form it represents an organicist fantasy of the total integration of the individual into the collective. It is one thing to reject the authoritarian model of "Catholic" hierarchy and ritual; it is quite another to naturalize political power as deriving its legitimation from ethnic solidarity. Governance based on forms of ethnic solidarity has had a strong tendency to slip into the rhetoric of family hierarchy ("father of the nation"); ties of blood can become bonds of ownership, in which the rulers and the intellectual elite take

ownership of an ethnic group as their people and appropriate the right to speak and act on behalf of that group.

The rise of virtual languages mediated by information technology, and the appearance of new forms and contexts driving centripetal forces for linguistic change, can perhaps suggest new ways of thinking about the relationship between the private and the public linguistic spheres. Traditional cultural orders such as premodern China, pre-Reformation Christianity, Judaism and Islam are based on a profound divorce between the private and the public linguistic spheres. The fact that these models have generally been rejected as foundations for the modern state should not imply that only vernacular orality is capable of providing the basis of a progressive sociolinguistic order.

Bibliography

Brewster, William N. (1901): "China's intellectual thraldom and the way of escape". In: *The Chinese Recorder*, 32, pp. 295-296.

DeFrancis, John (1950): *Nationalism and Language Reform in China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Dyer, Samuel (1835): "An Alphabetic Language for the Chinese". In: *The Chinese Repository*, 4, pp. 167-176.

Harris, Roy (1980): *The Language Makers.* London: Duckworth.

Haugen, Einar (1972): *The Ecology of Language: Essays by Einar Haugen*. Selected and introduced by Anwar S. Dil. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

— (1987): *Blessings of Babel: Bilingualism and Language Planning.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Leung, Cécile (2002): *Etienne Fourmont (1683-1745). Oriental and Chinese Languages in Eighteenth Century France*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.

Mufwene, Salikoko S. (2001): *The Ecology of Language Evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mühlhäusler, Peter (1996): *Linguistic Ecology: Linguistic Change and Linguistic Imperialism in the Pacific Region*. London: Routledge.

Ostler, Nicholas (2005): "Foundation for endangered languages". In: <http://www.ogmios.org/home.htm> (October 16, 2005).

Philipson, Robert (1992): *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Preston, C. F. (1876): "The Chinese Vernaculars: a Plea for the Cultivation and Use of the Vulgar Tongue in China". In: *The China Review*, 4, 3, pp. 152-160.

Whorf, Benjamin (1956): *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf.* Edited by Carroll, John B. Cambridge: MIT Press.